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# Nicaragua almost admits it had troops in Honduras

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As fighting on Honduras-Nicaragua border tapered off yesterday, the Reagan administration resumed its efforts to convince Americans that the "deepest, largest, most serious Nicaraguan penetration of Honduran territory ever" had taken place.

And in Managua, the Nicaraguan government came the closest it has ever been to admitting that its troops

had, in fact, been on Honduran soil.

The Defense Ministry announced that its troops "destroyed important enemy camps including the enemy's principal training center" along the border. It did not say the fighting had taken place in Honduran territory, but the Nicaraguan government has said repeatedly that the rebels' chief training camp is in Honduras.

The two-page Defense Ministry statement said 40 Sandinista soldiers and 350 rebels were killed in fighting, and 250 rebels and 116

Nicaraguan soldiers were wounded.

It acknowledged that five Sandinista soldiers were "missing" — without mentioning that Honduras had displayed five Nicaraguan dead and two live prisoners — but added that the ministry was trying to secure their "quick return" to Nicaragua.

Only last Tuesday, Nicaragua's ambassador to the United Nations, Nora Astorga, told a news conference that U.S. reports of the invasion were "an outrageous lie." She said: "I am denying very strongly that the Nicaraguan government has made

any sort of incursion into Honduran territory or any sort of aggression against Honduran territory."

Such denials — coupled with Honduras' early reluctance to admit that it had been invaded — caused widespread skepticism in Washington about the Reagan administration's version of events.

Yesterday, however, administration officials indicated that there were actually more Nicaraguan troops involved in the incursion than had first been reported.

"Now, we're using the figure 1,500. I suspect that when we get more complete intelligence reports

you'll see that the number is higher than that," Elliott Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told NBC's Today show.

"Currently, intelligence sources are saying that the number might be a lot higher. So, we've actually been on the conservative side of this in using numbers," he said.

Administration sources told The Washington Times that the intelligence referred to by Mr. Abrams indicates as many as 3,000 Nicaraguan troops may have entered Honduras during the incursion which began last Saturday.

The sources said two battalions totaling 1,500 men were involved in the attack on the Centro de Instrucción Militar (CIM) training camp, another battalion of 800 men entered the southern part of the Las Vegas salient and 500 Sandinistas occupied the San Andreas airstrip.

In addition, these sources said, Sandinista special force units numbering several hundred men were also sent into Honduras, apparently to take out sensitive listening posts that monitored Nicaraguan military communications in the region. This operation failed as well, they said.

Anti-Sandinista guerrillas were also reported yesterday to be disengaging from their nearly week-long battle as Honduran troops assumed the job of securing the border region.

"The Honduran forces are beginning to conduct mop-up operations to secure the area," said State Department spokesman Charles Redman.

Other administration sources indicated in private, however, that the few Honduran troops deployed — 300 Wednesday and another 300 yesterday — were not enough to stop stragglers from crossing the rugged and porous border.

"Lots of Sandies will escape," said one intelligence analyst. "It's a Mickey Mouse effort because [the Hondurans] had to scrape the barrel because of Holy Week." Many Honduran troops were on leave for the Easter holiday.

Honduran officials reported, however, that their armed forces had already clashed with Nicaraguan

troops near the border and that a Honduran army helicopter had been hit by machine-gun fire seven miles from the frontier.

The Sandinistas were reportedly withdrawing from the Las Vegas salient and the airstrip they had captured at San Andreas de Bocay, some 35 miles east of the CIM camp, according to one Pentagon source.

State Department officials cautioned, however, that 10,000 Sandinista troops remain near Honduras, on the Nicaraguan side of the border, and small units are crossing back and forth quite frequently.

One said 600 or so Sandinistas reentered Honduras on Tuesday to try to rescue some stragglers from the original invasion force. "There's lots of activity on that salient," he said. "Units are popping in and out."

Mr. Abrams rejected the theory that the Sandinistas were engaged in fleeing more than hot pursuit of fleeing rebels.

"It's an area in which there really isn't anybody," he said. "There are no Hondurans. It's a kind of no-man's land. They had to go deep into Honduras and try to search out other Nicaraguans. So there was no hot pursuit here. It just doesn't arise. They entered an empty area of Honduras and had to go in about 25 kilometers to find anybody."

The State Department also said as many as 3,500 Nicaraguan Indians may have fled to Honduras following Sandinista military attacks against an Indian resistance force.

Mr. Redman said reports reaching here indicated the attacks occurred at the villages of Bilwas-karma and Kum near the Rio Coco, which divides Nicaragua and Honduras.

He said as many as 12,000 Indian refugees previously had been reported in the Rio Coco area.

For the most part, the Indians had been released from Sandinista relocation centers but discovered that their home villages had been de-

stroyed by the Sandinistas, Mr. Redman said.

In Baton Rouge, La., Woody Jenkins, a Louisiana state representative and chairman of a refugee-aid group known as Friends of the Americas, said sketchy reports received by radio said at least 15 civilians were killed in the initial raid at Bilwas-karma, with another 25 killed and 19 injured in the follow-up bombing of a half-dozen villages.

*This report is based in part on wire service reports.*